

# Curses and Blessings

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**Passage:** “Therefore keep the words of this covenant and do them, that you may *prosper* in all that you do” (Deuteronomy 29:9, ESV).

**Introduction:** Mars (the Red Planet) has fascinated people throughout history, and today, it is one of the most explored bodies in the solar system, with many rovers and orbiters searching the planet for evidence of life, past or present.<sup>1</sup> On July 20, 1976, seven years after the Apollo 11 moon landing, Viking 1 arrived on the surface of Mars.<sup>2</sup> The first American spacecraft to touch its surface, it took the first close-up photographs of the rust-colored Martian surface. Astronomers believed the surface of Mars was similar enough to Earth to support life to a native civilization. But as human satellites and rovers have surveyed the planet during the past 50 years, this opinion has changed. Now Mars is known to be cold, desiccated and lifeless. Several factors make Mars **an uninhabitable planet**: (1) *microgravity* (the planet’s gravity is a mere 38% of Earth’s);<sup>3</sup> (2) *radiation*;<sup>4</sup> and (3) the atmosphere of Mars is mostly *carbon dioxide*.<sup>5</sup>

Some are still ambitious to see the first man or woman on the surface of the Red Planet.<sup>6</sup> NASA wants to send humans to the red planet by 2040.<sup>7</sup> There is a debate on whether human exploration of Mars is worth the risk and the cost. In 1966, NASA spent \$5.9 billion in expenditures (\$46 billion in 2018 dollars), which was 4.4% of federal spending. In 2018, NASA

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<sup>1</sup> In some ways, Mars is similar to earth. Mars is the fourth planet from the sun, while earth is the third. One Martian day is very close to a single day on Earth. Earth takes precisely 23h 56m and 4 s to complete a single sidereal rotation (0.997 Earth days); Mars does the same in about 24 hours and 40 minutes. The average distance between the earth and mars is The average distance between Earth and Mars is 140 million miles. On Earth, it is approximately 14°C, with plenty of variation due to geographical region, elevation, and time of year. The hottest temperature ever recorded on Earth was 70.7°C (159°F) in the Lut Desert of Iran, while the coldest temperature was -89.2°C (-129°F) at the Soviet Vostok Station on the Antarctic Plateau. On **Mars**, the average temperature is -46 °C (-51 °F). However, because of its tilted axis and orbital eccentricity, Mars also experiences considerable variations in temperature. These can be seen in the form of a low temperature of -143 °C (-225.4 °F) during the winter at the poles, and a high of 35 °C (95 °F) during summer and midday at the equator. Earth has a dense atmosphere that is rich in oxygen and water vapor, and which is generally warm and conducive to life. Mars, meanwhile, is generally very cold, but can become quite warm at times. It's also quite dry and very dusty.

<sup>2</sup> The Soviet Union had been probing Mars since the 1960s, with a few crashes and successful landings. Their Mars 3 landed successfully in 1971, becoming the first successful Mars landing. As of 2022, the Soviet Union, United States, and China have conducted Mars landings successfully.

<sup>3</sup> Among other consequences, microgravity results in: (1) decalcification of bones; (2) loss of muscle mass; (3) weakening of the heart.

<sup>4</sup> Without a protective magnetic shield and a thick atmosphere like Earth's, radiation from space has a nearly unimpeded path to the Martian surface.

<sup>5</sup> Mars' atmosphere is 95% carbon dioxide, 3% nitrogen, and 1.6% argon, compared to earth's 0.0391%.

<sup>6</sup> A trip to Mars would take about 21 months: 9 months to get there, 3 months there, and 9 months to get back.

<sup>7</sup> NASA's Chief Administrator Steve Jurczyk believes the agency could be ready to send humans to Mars by the late 2030s.

spent \$19.8 billion or 0.5% of federal spending. The Perseverance rover<sup>8</sup> is projected to cost \$2.7 billion dollars.

The more scientists study the earth and our solar system, the more they realize that the earth is uniquely suited for life. We live on a privileged planet with the **right conditions for life to survive and thrive**. Without the following conditions, life could not exist: (1) distance from the sun; (2) abundance of water; (3) a breathable atmosphere; (4) perfectly sized moon to control the tides; (5) a magnetic field<sup>9</sup> that protects living things from solar radiation.

According to the creation story, the earth was “without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep” (Gen 1:2). As God began his work, he brought order from initial disorder and chaos. He organized, he formed, he filled and he made provision for humans’ sustenance, well-being and enjoyment—water, daylight and darkness, vegetation, trees bearing fruit, and every living creature. From “without form and void” emerged the beauty and order of this world. God’s blessing enables his creatures to live and thrive.

**Body:**

- I. The story of Scripture begins with God bringing life out of darkness, creating order in the world and “blessing” all its creatures; it ends with God putting an end to the “curse.”
  - a. God’s blessing is what enables his creatures to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:21).
  - b. After “God created man [male and female] in his own image...God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...’” (Gen 1:28).
  - c. God’s blessing is conditional upon humans trusting and following God’s command to not eat “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:16-17).
  - d. After Adam and Eve’s disobedience, creation was cursed and mankind’s blessed dominion was replaced with laborious toil (Gen 3:15–19).
  - e. Through Abraham’s descendants, God intended to reverse the results of the curse by extending his blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3).
  - f. Rather than be a conduit for God’s blessing, Israel’s failure to live by God’s terms resulted in the curse of exile from their land and slavery to the nations.

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<sup>8</sup> Perseverance launched on July 30, 2020, and landed on Mars on February 18, 2021. As of March 17, 2023, *Perseverance* has been active on Mars for 2 years and 27 days.

<sup>9</sup> The Earth’s double protection (atmosphere and magnetosphere) partially blocks or deflects UV rays and totally blocks X-rays and gamma rays as well as solar wind particles and cosmic rays. This protection has been compared to the equivalent of a 30-meter-thick concrete wall, or one made of 80 centimeters of lead.

- g. In the new creation, “there shall be no more curse...” (Rev 22:3, NKJV).
- II. The themes of “blessing” and “curse” is interwoven throughout Scripture.<sup>10</sup>
- a. The Hebrew verb בָּרַךְ (*bārak*, “bless”) occurs 326 times in the OT.
    - i. It conveys the idea of pronouncing or enacting beneficial circumstances upon someone or something.
    - ii. God can “bless” something inanimate, like the seventh day (Gen 2:3; Ex 20:11).
    - iii. Or he can bless crops, fields and cities, food and drink, kneading troughs, baskets and barns (Gen 27:27–28; Exod 23:25–26; Deut 28:5, 8; 33:13).
    - iv. God “blesses” people (Gen 1:28; 24:1; Num 6:24).
    - v. Men and women can “bless” God (Gen 9:26; 14:19-20); a person “blesses” (*bārak*) God as a way of indicating praise and thanksgiving for his character and wonderful works (Ps 145:1).
    - vi. People can bless people by proclaiming or desiring good outcomes (Gen 24:60).
  - b. The Hebrew noun בְּרָכָה (*bērākā*, “blessing”) occurs 71 times in the OT.
    - i. It conveys the result of being blessed.
    - ii. Sometimes it refers to a pronouncement intended to enact benefits (Deut 33:1).
    - iii. Most often this noun identifies the benefits themselves (Ps 21:3).
    - iv. The blessing of God brings material prosperity (Gen 24:35; 26:3, 12–14; 30:27; 39:5; Lev 25:21; Deut 2:7; 12:7; 15:4–6, 10, 14; 16:15; Prov 10:22; Joel 2:14; Hag 2:19b; Mal 3:10).
- III. God promised to bless obedient Israel with well-being, prosperity and permanence in the land promised to Abraham (Deut 28:1-14); failure to obey would result in the painful consequence of exile (28:15-64).
- a. Israel was told, “And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you *high above all the nations* of the earth” (Deut 28:1).

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<sup>10</sup> In antiquity, the favor of the gods determined the prosperity (blessing) of people, families and nations. Everyone wanted the blessing of the divine, believing that this would bring fertility, prosperity, protection, deliverance, healing, long life, power, favor, success, etc. The blessing was tangible, its effects perceivable.”

- i. This reiterates an earlier promise, “You will be blessed more than any other people ...” (Deut 7:14a)
  - ii. This included adequate food and water supply, removal of sickness, no barrenness or miscarriage, and full, long lives (Exod 23:25–26).
- b. Moses continued, “And all these *blessings* shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God” (Deut 28:2). Israel would enjoy:
  - i. superior skills in agriculture and animal husbandry;
  - ii. physical health and fertility;
  - iii. Material wealth; and
  - iv. Protection against foreign invaders.
- c. God’s purpose for blessing Israel was that “all the peoples of the earth shall see” (Deut 28:10).
  - i. The nations, upon hearing of God’s wisdom on display through Israel, would declare, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deut 4:6).<sup>11</sup>
  - ii. Malachi would later prophesy, “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse... And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you *a blessing* until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. *Then all nations will call you blessed*, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal 3:10-12).
- d. Failure to abide by God’s terms would result in curses for Israel (Deut 28:15-68). Israel would suffer:
  - i. failure in agriculture and animal husbandry;
  - ii. sickness and barrenness;
  - iii. poverty; and
  - iv. defeat at the hands of their foreign enemies.
- e. In Deuteronomy 29, Moses predicts Israel’s failure to live according to God’s terms, which would result in captivity.

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<sup>11</sup> “As the nations of antiquity should behold Israel’s unprecedented progress, their attention and interest would be aroused” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 28).

- i. In captivity, they would wonder, “Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great *anger*?” (29:24).
- ii. The answer is, “It is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them. Therefore the *anger* of the Lord was kindled against this land... and the Lord uprooted them from their land in *anger* and *fury* and great *wrath*” (29:25-28)

IV. God’s wrath involves giving humans up to the consequences of their choice to run the world on their own terms.

- a. When Israel complained against both God and Moses because of a lack of acceptable water and food (Num 21:4-5), he “*sent* fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died” (vs 6).
  - i. The “fiery serpents” had been present in the wilderness all along (Deut 8:15-16).
  - ii. “As the Israelites indulged the spirit of discontent, they were disposed to find fault even with their blessings....Moses faithfully set before the people their great sin. It was God’s power alone that had preserved them...”<sup>12</sup>
  - iii. “Every day of their travels they had been kept by a miracle of divine mercy.... Because they had been shielded by divine power they had not realized the countless dangers by which they were continually surrounded.”<sup>13</sup>
  - iv. “God had subdued before them the fierce beasts of prey and the venomous reptiles of the forest and the desert. If with all these tokens of His love the people still continued to complain, the Lord would withdraw His protection until they should be led to appreciate His merciful care... As the protecting hand of God was removed from Israel, great numbers of the people were attacked by these venomous creatures.”<sup>14</sup>
  - v. The fiery serpents incident illustrates that the curses that come on Israel have to do with God giving them what they asked for.

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<sup>12</sup> Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 428

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428-429

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429

- b. Paul understood God's wrath in terms of giving humans up to their own idolatrous ways.
  - i. Paul said that God "allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 14:16).
  - ii. This has resulted in the nations being "filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness" (Rom 1:29).
  - iii. It is for this reason, that *the wrath of God* is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom 1:18).
  - iv. Three times, Paul explains the "wrath of God" in these terms, "God gave them up" (Rom 1:24, 26, 28).
  - v. Without God, this world and everything in it is constantly drifting back toward chaos. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:24-28).
- V. God's laws are not arbitrary. When they are followed, the results are a blessing. When they are ignored, the results are disastrous.
  - a. God's only desire is for the well-being of his people.
    - i. "...keep the words of this covenant and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do" (Deut 29:9).
    - ii. "...keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good..." (Deut 10:13).
    - iii. "...the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always..." (Deut 6:24)
  - b. The Old Testament presents the disastrous social and ethical effects of idolatry.
    - i. When Israel went after other gods, the effects were not just religious but also ethical.
    - ii. How humans behave toward each other depends on what or whom they worship.
    - iii. For Israel, ethical behavior is defined by the character of their God.

**Conclusion:** Israel was told that prosperity (blessing) depends on their operating society according to God's terms; by choosing life according to their own terms, Israel would experience a curse, not as a vindictive punishment from God, but as the inevitable consequences of God

giving them up to their own rebellion. When we live our lives according to God's terms, we will be blessed and our lives will be a blessing to others. God's laws are not arbitrary and suffering is a result of humans choosing to govern themselves on their own terms, rather than God's.

In Genesis 1-3 and Deuteronomy 27-30, God's blessing is the result of God's gracious, kind and generous intervention on their behalf. It is a call to be fruitful and multiply and participate in God's life-sustaining power in a secure, abundant environment. God's blessing is tied to his power to create order and abundance out of chaos and rescue Israel from Egypt. "Curse" is the opposite of "blessing." It is not God's vindictive punishment of humans. Rather, when humans choose to run the world on their own terms, they inevitably choose separation from God. When humans rebel, God hands them over to the curse. They enter into the state in which the cosmos existed before God brought order to the chaos. Israel returns to exile. Choices that lead people to separation from God, the source of all life, ultimately lead to destruction.

Our world is filled with suffering, corruption, poverty, war, disease, family break-ups and addiction. In Scripture, this dysfunctional state of things is called "the curse." This curse is the result of God handing people over to the consequences of trying to run their lives on their own terms. Without God, this world and everything in it is constantly drifting back toward the chaos and disorder that existed when in the beginning it was "without form and void."